

423 But what irony is all this talk of chiefs and clans and possessions, where
 656 only a mere handful of spiritless people is concerned. The Veddas alone recognise their boundaries, Government does not. Quite rightly they are not permitted to fell their forests without sanction, or to give their lands away; for what would be easier than to cozen such simple folk. These Veddas may cultivate *chenas* with permission from Government but without tax; a privilege they are impotent to avail themselves of, and are still hunters enough to disregard, whether under encouragement or compulsion. "What lands have the Veddas now?" lamented Kaurala. "Our rightful lands! Why should we be deprived of them? The earth of our land is honey to us". And in those words he spoke the doom of his race.

Let us leave the last of the Veddas alone, and not try to fashion them to our ways; for that would kill them the sooner. Let them die out, scattered in their lonely jungles, the hunters they have always been. A few decades hence and the Vedda will be but a name.

651 Not every Vedda is exempt from taxation. I believe those in the Eastern Province are taxed, while those of Uva are not. Why this distinction, it is hard to understand; except for the plea that nowadays it is difficult to say who is a Vedda and who not. But, in cases of doubt, the conditions of life that characterise a particular community should be the criterion that influences the decision, favourably or otherwise. It does seem hard that these poor people, who never handle a single cent from one year's end to another, and have barely a rag with which to cover their nakedness, should have to pay a tax of two rupees with the richest in the land! In default of payment, a penalty of some ten days' work on the roads is imposed; an equitable provision on the face of it; but what of the family with the bread-winner thus engaged? After all, these people only live from day to day; and even sickness very often means starvation.

241 As for *chena* cultivation,* there can be little doubt that it is the one form
 311 of agriculture, best suited to the primitive folk of the arid forests; but a
 656 serious attempt should be made to better the wasteful methods now in vogue. I remember once travelling through a Province where a progressive, but misguided policy—as applied to these parts—prevailed: *chena* licences had been withheld that year with a view to enforcing paddy cultivation; (in such forests! and among such folk!). The result was disastrous. It was heart-rending to see the starved, emaciated villagers Sinhalese and Veddas alike, digging out wild, unsavoury yams from the baked ground. They would have given their lives for a little *kurukhan* or maize, which was nowhere to be had.

**Chenas* represent a very primitive and wasteful form of agriculture. In June of each year an area of jungle is leased by several families. The trees are felled, and burnt two weeks later. The land is then cleared, except for a residue of charred trunks. Temporary huts are suitably disposed, and the whole surrounded by a fence-work of burnt logs, so strong that it must be proof against elephants, so tall that it must top the sambur's leap, so close that it must keep out the hare. By August this work is completed.

In September the crops are sown—Maize or *irindu* which takes 4 months, and manioc which takes a year to mature; vegetables such as pumpkins, melons and beans (*puhul*, *wallaha*, *thimbiri*, *kakiri*, *lema*); yams such as *kukul-sila*, *wal-sila*, *walapal*, *kodol*. In October and November, *kurukhan*, chillies, green-gram, and perhaps a little paddy is planted.

During February, March, and April the *kurukhan* and maize crops are harvested—or rather what is left of them when the elephants and drought have had their say

VEDDA JUNGLES

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In their inhospitable forests, the most wild and arid in the Island, where food is scarce and only attained with great hardship, the Vedda is king. His lifelong apprenticeship to the harsh conditions fits him superbly to the mercile task. He knows season and place and is sensitive to the slightest clue. How ill-fitted for this life are we of the towns who would starve by a tree with a honey-comb or with a succulent yam under foot. They make us feel like children, in that environment, these admirable Crichtons of the jungle, and our urban refinements as dross compared with their simple skill and hardihood. 311

It is truly a delight to travel with the Vedda and watch his ways. Moving silently, speaking no word except to "hum" an animal call to attract each other's attention, they allow nothing to escape them, and read the ground like a book, indicating spoor where you see nothing. Becoming sceptical of such claims I thought I would test the skill of Suthu Banda, also known as Poromola. Telling him to turn his face away, I tip-toed lightly on the bed of leaf that carpeted our path, and asked him to indicate my foot-prints. 151 224

"Here they are, and here," he said without a moment's hesitation. "Why, it's easy; don't you see the leaves turned?" (I certainly did not, demonstrate as hard as he might). "What is the difficulty for us to see a human foot-print here," he continued, "who have to follow a mouse-deer's trail on ground that shows less than this."

We had halted by a tree of great height and enormous girth, branchless for quite forty feet from the ground—as awkward a proposition for a climber as one could wish. I asked Suthu Banda whether he could climb it. "Why not," he said; and, without so much as putting down the axe hitched to his shoulder, he mounted the rock beside which the tree stood, and looked up a second or two. Then, shinning up an adjacent sapling that shot high, swung on to the slender extremity of the big tree's lowermost branch that sagged under his weight, and moved along with a carelessness painful to watch. He was soon among boughs no bigger than a man's wrist, and from the dizzy height wished to know whether we wanted him to go higher! None of your artificial aids, such as loops, for the Vedda; he is a veritable quadrumana, with feet as prehensile as hands. 481

They have a sure method of killing sambur. In the rainy months, and also, more rarely, in the drought, these animals climb to the tops of solitary hills. The Vedda, always watchful for the opportunity, is quick to detect this by the spoor. Cautiously attaining the summit, one or two of them guard with guns the only path by which the sambur must 224

Yams, chillies and melons survive a few months longer. After one to one and a half years the *chana* is abandoned as worthless, and a fresh acreage leased; for *hurrakka* especially, is reputed to take such heavy toll of the soil, that this must be allowed to lie fallow for some ten or twelve years before being fit for recultivation! A terrible consumption of forest land results, unless controlled; harmless enough where a few families exist in vast forests; but sadly devastating in places at all populous. [241]

Irrigation, as these people know it, is solely what heaven bestows. Water may lie to hand but is not seriously utilized. A drought brings ruin, and scatters the folk far in quest of food. It is time a more economic system of agriculture was introduced to the Vanni, and the people taught, by the institution of model *channas*, at least the value of forest leaf mould as a manure, and the advantages of some simple system of irrigation from available streams or wells, such as the Tamils of Jaffna and the Moors of the Eastern Province exploit so well.